

US Elections 2012: Forward, or Backward?

¿Avance o retroceso?

*This is an English language version of an essay which originally appeared in the Mexico City-based, Spanish language journal, **Letras Libres**. The Spanish version was translated from an earlier version of this essay, which I filled out a bit and added a few things. So it should be seen as a version of the Spanish original, and not a direct translation. The Spanish version can be found [here](#).*

President Barack Obama has attempted to frame the choice for Americans this year in a simple way – he will take the country forward, Mitt Romney will take it backward. A simple construction, but a powerful one I think to understand the true nature of the 2012 American elections.

As the people of Latin America well know the world, and our hemisphere, is in the midst of profound change. Described by the brilliant Fareed Zakaria as an era witnessing “the rise of the rest,” we are seeing a historically significant movement to market capitalism and democracy in virtually every part of the world. An unprecedented global middle class is forming; trade flows are expanding; the internet and the mobile phone are connecting humanity as never before; a “youth bulge” in many developing nations offers both promise and great peril; ideological opponents of this post WWII inspired version of a nation state are weakening; and as we feel every day in our own lives, the velocity of this transformation seems to be only increasing.

There can be little doubt that despite the remarkable progress made over the past generation across the globe, there are significant challenges remaining: tackling climate change, improving the way we provide skills to our workers and students in a more competitive global economy; state capitalism as seen in China and Russia and other nations; and a still unstable Middle East and Islamic world just to name a view. But while significant challenges remain, there can be little doubt that humankind is going through perhaps it’s more remarkable and productive period on all of our history. More people can do, contribute, and participate meaningfully in the life of their communities and nations than ever before. What lies before us may be indeed a dark time, but my own sense is that we also may be entering – if we get things right – an unprecedented age of possibility for the people of the world.

While this age holds great promise it has proven to be profoundly unsettling to the great architect of this age, the United States. In the past decade and a half we have seen a President impeached; a contested Presidential election settled along partisan lines; high levels of electoral volatility; twelve years of no wage and income growth for American workers; dangerous levels of inequality; reckless foreign engagements which cost the nation extraordinary sums of money, global prestige and human capital; a Great Recession; a financial collapse; a burst housing bubble and one of the most devastating attacks ever on American soil. It is hard to argue that America’s response to this first decade or so of this new century has been successful abroad or at home.

Additionally, these great global changes have manifested themselves in very particular ways in American society, which has magnified the sense of rapid and even unsettling change which is so much a condition of modern life across the world. As perhaps the most technologically advanced nation on Earth, the

transformation of our economy from industrial to digital has been perhaps more profound here than just about anywhere else. One very direct impact of this has been the incredible speed in which remnants of the industrial age – companies, skills and schools, well known consumer brands, broadcast media – have been rendered obsolete and not yet fully replaced by their digital analogs.

But perhaps most profound of these uniquely American changes is the way our people have changed. Our demographic and racial history – the triumph of Europeans over Native Americans, and the subjugation of African slaves – is well known. It produced a society dramatically unequal, where an overwhelming majority oppressed powerless minorities. Any student of American history knows how significant the struggle over equality and racial integration has been, and by the early 1960s American had become a nation ninety percent of white European descent and about ten percent black and everything else.

But this demographic and racially trajectory set on a very different course in the 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s finally ended institutional segregation in America. And one of the most important piece of legislation ever passed in America that no one has ever heard of – the immigration act of 1965 – had the effect of changing America’s immigration targets from white Europeans to Asians and Latin Americans.

The net impact of both these changes is the most profound demographic and racial transformation of the people living on this land called America since the arrival of the Europeans in the late 15th century. In the past 47 years, fueled by high levels of non-white immigration, America has gone from a 90 percent white/10 percent minority nation to one 65 percent white and 35 percent people of color. Current estimates have the nation becoming majority non-white in 2040.

Of course the central driver of this change is an historic wave of immigration from Mexico and Latin America into the US. In 1965 there were 3 million Latinos in the US. Today there are 45 million Latinos 15 percent of the US population, a group in their own country would be the second largest Latin country in the Americas (if we exempt Iberian Brazil). There are now more Latinos in the US than African Americans, and people of Mexican descent make up a full ten percent – one out of ten – of the people who live in the US today. This figure is expected to double by that magic crossover point in 2040, with Latinos making up fully 30 percent of the US population, or almost a third.

Additionally, the great baby boom generation, for so long the dominant driver of American culture, is aging, and yielding to a new generation, made up largely of their children, the Millennials. This generation is the largest generation in US history and is beginning to enter the American electorate in very large numbers. Its members have grown up in the world I have described – more global, more connected, more competitive more diverse and have had very direct experience the inadequate response offered by American leaders in the past decade. America has in essence its own “youth bulge” and how this generation swings politically might just determine which party reigns for the next 30-40 years and much else about American culture.

By any measure – our own youth bulge and this historic transition to a non-white America - is an extraordinary level of demographic and socio-economic change, one which should be expected to roil the traditional politics of a nation.

It is the premise of this essay that American politics in 2012 can be best understood by examining the reaction of political parties, ideological movements and elected leaders to the vast changes – demographic, economic, geopolitical – roiling the world today.

The Democrats have talked of “building a bridge to the 21st century,” moving America “forward,” and “pivoting to Asia.” Both Presidents Clinton and Obama have put crafting an adequate response to globalization and our changing economy front and center in their politics. The current Administration has struggled to free American foreign policy from a failed neo-conservative period and launched the most ambitious global trade process in a generation; is re-orienting US foreign policy towards Asia; has attempted to usher in a new era, slowly, with Cuba; seen relations and trade with our neighbor Mexico deepen as never before; and by embracing the aspirations of everyday people of the North African and Middle East, and through its Internet Freedom agenda, in other parts of the world, has begun, in fits and starts perhaps, to re-identify America with its liberal internationalist tradition which has done so much good for so many.

The Democrats are also in the process of building a political coalition of the people of this new America. In 2008, President Obama won two-thirds of both the Millennial vote and the Hispanic vote, margins which helped him win 53 percent of the national vote, the best showing for a Democrat in a Presidential election since 1964. The Democratic coalition is young, diverse, growing and geographically spread out. In 2008 it found its young modern black berry wielding, globetrotting, self described racial ‘Mutt,’ Barack Obama, who was not just America’s first black President but clearly the first President of a 21st century America on track to have a non-white majority by 2040.

The story of the Republican and conservative response to these great changes in American life has been a very different story. A little history is in order here to explain.

The rise of modern American Conservatism was fueled by its response to the success of the Civil Rights era of the 1960s and the triumph of integration over segregation. The Republicans, who had been out of power in the US since the early 1930s, adopted very direct appeals to whites unsure or uncomfortable of integration at the very core of their emergent politics. Their political strategy was called the “Southern Strategy,” which sought to and successfully flipped the more racially intolerant South from the Democrats. Their economic approach, low taxes, less government and accusing Democrats of “tax and spend” was a way to say Democrats were taking money away from “you” and giving it to the “them,” an undeserving class who of course happened to be black. Their foreign policy – strong anti-Communism – was also fundamentally about exploiting fear – however appropriate - of a dangerous foreign threat.

Lead by Ronald Reagan and Newt Gingrich, the Republicans used this new formula to break the hold of Democratic liberalism on the country, winning the Presidency in 1980 and finally ending sixty years of Democratic control of Congress in 1994. Conservatism was indeed a highly successful political

enterprise of the later part of the 20th century. It unseated the Democrats; helped bring an end to communism abroad (though Democrats did their part in this too) and on domestic issues provided a needed corrective to a US liberalism which had perhaps lost its way after many decades in power.

But the historical context which created the conditions of this conservative ascendancy began to be swept away by events. Large waves of immigration dramatically increased the share of minorities in the American electorate, making the GOP's core domestic offering, infused by exploitation of racial fear, much less appealing. The end of Communism, the Clinton Administration's aggressive championing of the liberalization of the global economy and the PC/Internet tech boom unleashed powerful new forces which have led to rising global competition, the "rise of the rest" and a very different global economic and geopolitical dynamic.

As the world changed, and a new set of much less agile leaders took the reign of power, the Republican Party and its Reagan coalition has struggled to understand new realities and adapt. President Bush simply didn't understand the new emergent threat of non-state terrorism and left American unprepared for 9/11. His economic policies, enormous tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans and "de-regulation," led to a housing collapse, rising inequality, slow job growth, declining incomes, a financial collapse and the Great Recession while offering no correction as conditions worsened. And the development of the concept of "pre-emption" in foreign policy seems in hind sight to be particularly reactionary, a loud angry scream against "the rise of the rest" and the end of true post WWII American supremacy.

While on immigration and integration George W. Bush was much more modern than his Party, by 2005 his more enlightened approach to immigration and the changing racial dynamic had been roundly rejected by mainstream Republicans. In the fall of 2005, despite the President's opposition, House Republicans passed a bill requiring the arrest, deportation and felonization of 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States. It was as many said at that time an invitation for all these new non-white arrivals "to go home," and of course was among the most shameful pieces of legislation ever passed by the United States Congress in its history.

What we didn't know in 2009 after the departure of President Bush was whether the terrible outcomes of the Bush Presidency were due to his failures, or to a broader set of failures gripping the modern Republican Party. The rise of the Tea Party in 2010, and the Romney campaigns embrace of Paul Ryan, an intellectual leader of a new and more reactionary right, has made it clear that this resistance and fear of modernity is now at the core of today's Republican Party. What animates and unites the right in 2012 is the simple call for smaller government and less taxes, an approach not dissimilar from the tax and spend arguments of previous decades. The Romney/Ryan ticket has called for the elimination of all taxes on investment income, lower taxes for wealthy Americans and severe cuts in all programs benefitting the middle class and those striving to get there. The only part of the government which would receive funding increases would be the Defense Department, even though today the US spends more on defense than every other nation on earth combined.

Despite the very real threat of global climate change, the Romney energy plan calls for continued preference of development of dirty fossil fuels over cleaner forms of energy. Romney remarkably

moved his party far to the right on issues of race, embracing the nativist strategy of “self-deportation,” a position which had never been adopted by a mainstream Republican leader before. And on foreign policy, the only issue he has really engaged on is Iran, calling for exactly what American did so unsuccessfully in Afghanistan and Iraq – a unilateral invasion by the United States, and in this case, Israel, with no real articulation of what would come after yet another US military action in the region.

What I think has to be considered disturbing as opposed to just disappointing, however, is the growing mainstreaming of anti-democratic strategies by the right. Many states with Republican legislatures have past new laws making it harder for people to vote, which will disproportionately affect the Democratic leaning younger and more diverse electorate. New campaign laws advanced by Republicans now allow unlimited, unreported contributions to be used in elections, making the voice of a privileged few as powerful as the voices of millions of every day Americans. The debt ceiling fight last summer was a tactic to avoid the normal legislative process to produce a budget and amounted to an elevated form of political blackmail.

At the recent Republican Convention in Tampa, the words globalization, rising powers, rise of the rest, were not mentioned. The audience in the hall was almost entirely white. This was the second GOP Convention in a row steeped in nostalgia for an America long gone (and probably never there in the first place). And this Convention, as was reported by many, was full of harsh, over the top criticisms – many inaccurate or false – of America’s current mixed-race President but while offering no solutions to the many problems facing America and the world today.

In this election cycle the Republican’s angry war against modernity has escalated and appears to have become institutionalized. It is almost as if the more the world moves away from the simplicity of the Reagan moment the more angry and defiant – and of course wrong – the Republican offering is becoming. It is understandable, perhaps, but especially tragic, nonetheless. For at this moment the vast changes cascading across the world are bringing about a world of more potential and possibility than any time in human history. There are more people alive today who have the life circumstances and education levels to add value to the human condition – in art, in medicine, in science, in sport, in commerce, in NGOs and government – than ever before.

For leaders of what we call the center-left – the descendents of FDR, JFK, Clinton and now Obama – this moment is one of great political opportunity and arguably historic responsibility. In a time of great change it is hard to conserve – for the things one is trying to hold to, as we see with the party of Romney – are being swept away by history’s rapid course. It is a time for those in who believe in progress, the opposite of the conservative impulse, to assert themselves on the global stage. To provide the type of prosperity and peace, and sense of possibility, that the world and our societies offer today is our great opportunity, and an opportunity which holds greater promise for mankind than ever before. But it will only be achieved if we stay deeply grounded in new realities of this new century and show the courage to build a new politics for a new time and the new aspirations of people hungry for a better life.

So in a very real sense the American election of 2012 is about “forward,” and “backward.” And just like President Obama got this framing right, he is closer to getting the policy response right to the vast

changes afoot in the world today than an aging and reactionary American right, which is why he appears headed towards re-election despite challenging times domestically and abroad. It is indeed the great question of American politics now whether and when the Republican Party can modernize and adapt to the new realities of the 21st century, choosing forward over backward. Doing so of course would be good for America, and for the world. But how this happens and who leads them to this better place is still very hard to discern sitting in Washington, DC in the fall of 2012.

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